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Editorial

This edition of *JEBS* presents a collection of papers delivered at the European Baptist Theology Teachers Conference. It took place along with the Eighth Forum of the Consortium of European Baptist Theological Schools (CEBTS) in the Baptist Centre in Radość, Warszawa, Poland, 02-05 July 2014. Being a regular bi-annual event of scholars of the CEBTS network, this conference was distinctively organised in full partnership with the Division for Theology and Education of European Baptist Federation. Participants in the conference reflected on the theme of ‘The Church: Towards a Common Vision’ and enjoyed the warm hospitality of the staff and the Rector Gustaw Cieslar of the Warsaw Baptist Theological Seminary. The theme indicates that ecumenical concerns raised by the report under the same name of the World Council of Churches were at the centre of discussions (<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision>, Faith and Order Paper no. 214, 2013). Next to this document participants exchanged ideas on another report – ‘The Word of God and the Life of the Church’ (BWA, Kindle Edition), summarising the result of the international conversations between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance, 2006-2010. Ecumenical partnership does not come easy to most of the European Baptist communities. While several Baptists came to prominence in ecumenical circles, Baptist bodies or communities are virtually absent from the ecumenical assemblies. Considering that ecclesiology is at the heart of Baptist identity, the hope of the organisers of the conference has been that the two reports will challenge the Baptists to learn from other traditions, will invite them to contribute to the ecumenical conversation and will spark further reflections on the unity in diversity of the Body of Christ in the contemporary world. As one may judge by the contributions to this volume, the hopes are well grounded.

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Where Do We Go from Here? Some Challenges for European Baptist Ecclesiology

Toivo Pilli

A believers' community – living life together, seeking to worship God, and participating in God's mission, is involved in a dynamic process. Baptists have a continuous and huge work to do in interpreting the ecclesiological emphases that are handed over to them as members of a radical tradition and as participants in the worldwide church. The following is a church historian's view: with all the limits that this perspective brings along and hopefully with some benefits it offers. Baptists began as people who promoted a paradigm shift: They were convinced that the church is a 'company of faithful people, who have been called apart by God,' they were 'projecting a very different understanding of the church' when compared to the prevailing ecclesiological views in the 17th century.¹ Nevertheless, they have an ongoing task to seek a fresh understanding of being a church and to face challenges of contextualisation.

Indeed, Baptists in Europe and beyond face new challenges. There are elements of transition in religious culture. Stuart Murray has noted the need to 'probe more deeply into the Christendom legacy and the changes in mindset and action required of Christians in the strange new world of post-Christendom'.² There are also encounters with Islam. For example, Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut, Lebanon, has become a leading study centre in exploring relationships between Evangelicals and Islam. The European Baptist Federation theology and education work-group has published some materials on the theme of 'Baptist churches in the changing society'.³ In addition, there are other influences: including the growth of ethnic churches in Europe, such as in Britain and Norway, and politically orientated limitations towards Evangelicals, such as in Byelorussia and Uzbekistan. These are only a few of the changes and developments.

Besides and behind all administrative and organisational issues, the underlying task is theological. This task is also inevitably ecumenical. There is an increasing need to place the questions of religious identity not only into the framework of one's own tradition but into a wider setting.

¹ Furman Hewitt, 'The Church', in Wayne Stacy, ed., *A Baptist's Theology* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth and Helwys, 1999), p. 114.

² Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), p. 7.

³ See <http://www.ebf.org/resources-theology-and-education>, accessed 9 September 2014.

Baptists need to become better informed by those who share the same journey, even if they do not belong to the same ecclesiological sphere. And when being a church on a journey, some other issues cannot be avoided: What about mission? What about worship? Mission and worship are two defining ecclesiological characteristics, the hands and feet of a church body if I may paraphrase 1 Corinthians 12.

Four key words – theology, ecumenism, mission and worship – give structure to this article. They denote areas where Baptists continue to explore their ecclesial identity.

Theological Focus

It has been argued that in majority of theological topics it is hardly possible to find a clear and distinct baptistic perspective.⁴ Regarding Trinity or Christology or salvation or eschatology baptistic believers have much in common with other church traditions. This is not a drawback, this is an evidence of Baptists (capital B) or baptists (small b) belonging to the wider Christian family. However, in a recent volume, Steven Holmes states that

on the particular issue of ecclesiology, it seems to me that there are distinctive Baptist (or perhaps baptist) positions... [O]ften we need to find distinctive arguments of our own, because our vision of what it is to be Christ's church is sufficiently different from others to make the easy sharing of arguments impossible.⁵

James McClendon finds the baptist theological centre in the narrative and common life in ethics, where ‘vision and community and hope converge in the disciples’ way’.⁶ His theological approach begins with convictions of the believers’ community rather than from doctrinal propositions.

Seeking for a better understanding of church, both in its universal and local dimensions, we touch the nerve of baptistic identity. But it also means that it is an area where Baptists have something to offer to other traditions. A good example is the document ‘The Word of God in the Life of the Church,’ where the baptistic language of *covenant* is used side by

⁴ The term ‘baptistic’ is widely used within the academic circle of the International Baptist Theological Study Centre and beyond as an extension of the use of the term ‘baptist’ (with small ‘b’), introduced by James Wm. McClendon (see his *Ethics* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1986), pp. 9, 25-26) to designate communities ‘of the Free Church and believers’ baptism tradition’ which exclude ‘traditionally state sponsored ecclesial bodies’ (‘Editor’s Preface,’ in Rollin G. Grams and Parush R. Parushev, eds., *Towards an Understanding of European Baptist Identity: Listening to the Churches in Armenia, Bulgaria, Central Asia, Moldova, North Caucasus, Omsk and Poland* (Prague, CZ: IBTS Publisher, 2006), p. 10). Cf. Parush R. Parushev, ‘Baptistic Convictional Hermeneutics,’ in Helen Dare and Simon Woodman, eds., *The Plainly Revealed Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2011), pp. 172-190).

⁵ Steven Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London and New York: T & T Clark International, 2012), p. 8.

⁶ McClendon, *Ethics*, pp. 27-28, 62.

side with a more universal language of *koinonia*, in order to interpret the unity of the church.⁷ This may prove helpful for future ecumenical conversations as well as for Baptists themselves in their task of living out their faith within the body of Christ. Covenant defines first God's initiative in grace and saving action, and only then it refers to a human response. This God-centred vision, expressed in a more detailed way by Paul Fiddes, is a refreshing reminder in Baptist communal life and ecclesial thought, especially as Baptist practice too often puts emphasis on, and limits itself to, human activity and individual piety.⁸

If ecclesiology is a theological focus for Baptists, and it helps to define their identity, there is another obvious – though not self-evident – conclusion. Baptists, if they are faithful to their way of being a church and to their communal hermeneutics, are called to wrestle with theological questions. They need not to be content with just describing their practices, but should also be ready to analyse the theological meaning and significance of what they practice. There is a grain of truth in statements which underline that even in issues of baptism by immersion the Baptists are often 'far more based on a recovery of biblical praxis than on any reflection on biblical theology,' and 'perhaps bizarrely, Baptists have been remarkably poor on developing a theology of baptism over their history, often resting content with developing an account of proper administration of the rite'.⁹

No doubt there is quality scholarly work published on Baptist ecclesiology, including on issues related to baptism,¹⁰ not least by the efforts made by the International Baptist Theological Seminary (now relocated from Prague to Amsterdam, and renamed International Baptist Theological Study Centre). Paternoster Press and the Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, Oxford, have published significant volumes on this topic. However, I want to argue that this is not enough in three ways.

First, there are areas and topics which still need to be covered or revisited, such as Baptist analysis of church government in changing culture or understanding of eucharist in an ecumenical context. Secondly, for theological reflection, it is crucial to expand the scope of contributions from different cultural contexts. For example, 'open table' or 'open

⁷ 'The Word of God in the Life of the Church', in *American Baptist Quarterly*, vol. XXXI, no. 1 (spring 2012), pp. 40-41.

⁸ See, for example, Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), chapter 2, pp. 21-47.

⁹ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, p. 90.

¹⁰ For example, George Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962); Anthony Cross, *Baptism and the Baptists: Theology and Practice in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002); Stanley K. Fowler, *More than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery on Baptismal Sacramentalism* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).

membership' is in general welcomed in British context and rejected outright in some Slavic Baptist churches. But both views are based on a theological or practical argumentation. Baptist theology needs theologians who take the effort to cross the cultural-theological boundaries – not least within Baptist family itself. Thirdly, if Baptist or baptistic interpretation of the Bible most naturally takes place in the local church context, not in academia only, and if primary theology is equally important as secondary theology for Baptist self-understanding, then the task of theological reflection is placed not exclusively on scholars, but also on local church, on church members, and on those in pastoral ministry.¹¹

To remain true to a Baptist heritage poses a requirement to take the theological task beyond specialised scholarly circles: to involve active church members, to inspire youth groups, and listen to each other in struggling with certain Biblical passages. It would be easy, but too risky for the spiritual health of a church community, to swallow ready-made Bible study materials without critical approach. This is a challenge also to ministers – to rediscover the hard and joyful work of interpreting their historical faith. Pastors are often overwhelmed by administrative and management demands and they easily lose their role as theologians. It is hardly possible to talk about 'theologianhood of all believers'¹² without the ministers themselves being involved in the interpretative process.

Intentional Ecumenism

Ecumenical conversations constitute another task for Baptists. It is not only about the official conversations, such as those between Baptists and Roman Catholics, or Baptists and Lutherans. Mutual exchange of ideas and influence through partnerships is for European Baptists a reality which – at least in some countries – has moved beyond official round-tables and reached the level of local churches. Wherever this happens, it is evidence that Baptists are less worried about themselves; they are more confident of their identity, and more aware of God's work on the wider scale.

Ecumenical dialogue is a way for Baptists, as well as for other church traditions, to develop a deeper and an increasingly positive self-understanding. This may be truer in Eastern European situations where the years of atheistic pressures after the Second World War created an inward-

¹¹ For reflections on the dynamic relationship between primary and secondary theology, see Christopher J. Ellis, 'Gathering around the Word: Baptists, Scripture, and Worship', in Helen Dare and Simon Woodman, eds., *The Plainly Revealed Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2011), pp.101-121), and Parushev, 'Baptistic Convictional Hermeneutics'.

¹² See also Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press and Herald Press, 2000), pp. 175-177.

looking view, a kind of ‘survival theology’ among Evangelicals.¹³ At least in Eastern Europe there is among Baptists a long ‘heritage’ of understanding their identity in negative terms. Negative identity declares: ‘We are not Lutherans, we are not Orthodox, we are not Pentecostals.’ Positive identity tries to find the defining centre and characteristic practices of one’s own story without necessarily confronting or excluding somebody else. The positive identity offers a ground for a critical evaluation of one’s tradition, but it also provides a better awareness that we all have integrated elements of practices and beliefs from others with whom we have a common journey.

This borrowing, or mutual flow of influence, has taken place all through Baptist history, though not always Baptists have been ready to admit this. Estonian Baptists, at the end of the 19th century, took over some aspects of Moravian practices and views – their little wooden chapels look exactly like Moravian chapels, and their emphasis on the dramatic suffering of Christ at eucharist reflects clearly Pietistic Lutheran and Moravian spirituality. Karl Kaups, an Estonian Baptist leader in the 1930s, said that Moravians in the Baltics practised ‘personal religious experience, free commitment and voluntary offerings as well as internal fellowship’.¹⁴ Constantine Prokhorov has recently done a research that explains the influences of Russian Orthodoxy on Slavic Baptists.¹⁵ These kind of conclusions would have been almost impossible by Russian Baptists 50 years ago. Now this perspective is rather seen as a learning experience.

Nigel G. Wright has argued in another direction – that baptistic or free church tradition continues to spread and widen its impact. In his book, *Free Church, Free State*, he makes a bold claim that there are ‘two fundamental tendencies in church order, the catholic and the baptist which could be seen as the twin foci of an ellipse. These, seen in the broadest terms, are the two basic tendencies of the church.’ The catholic tendency ‘views the authenticity of the church as deriving from its historical origins in Christ and prizes continuity.’ The baptist tendency ‘finds it in the vitality of the local congregation and prizes freedom’.¹⁶

Even though Wright is convinced that both traditions are complementary, and ‘each broad tradition has what the other needs,’¹⁷ the baptistic contribution to the worldwide church should – according to

¹³ Karl Hainz Walter, ‘The Future of Theological Education within the European Baptist Federation’, *Religion in Eastern Europe*, 21.3 (June, 2001), p. 22.

¹⁴ Karl Kaups, *Riigikirik ja vabakogudus* [State Church and Free Church] (Keila: Külvaja, 1934), p. 105.

¹⁵ Constantine Prokhorov, *Russian Baptists and Orthodoxy, 1960-1990* (Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2013).

¹⁶ Nigel G. Wright, *Free Chruch, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), pp. 256-257.

¹⁷ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, p. 257.

Wright – not be underestimated. On the contrary, through self-reflection and dialogue with others, it becomes more significant and meaningful. Wright's conclusion is worded carefully but clearly: 'My contention is that both in the growth of churches of the baptist kind and in their impact upon the catholic tradition to which they stand in some contrast the energy of the free church tradition in the future will be undiminished.'¹⁸ However, he does not talk about one tradition getting an upper hand over the other, but believes that the future and the health of the church of Jesus Christ depend on the 'ability of these broad models of church to interact and interpenetrate'.¹⁹ The intentional ecumenism is not only a means to gain denominational respect in a family of churches, but a matter of living as part of the universal church – the body of Christ.

Ecumenical interaction, then, is not just about better understanding of each other, though this is important for the unity of the church as well as for cooperation in a local level. It is about the ability to fulfil her mission, participate in the mission of God, and be faithful to Jesus Christ in a specific historical context. Miroslav Volf has expressed the need to learn from other churches as a method of being accountable to Christ in the fellowship of brothers and sisters: 'In order to keep our allegiance to Jesus Christ pure, we need to nurture commitment to the multicultural community of Christian churches. We need to see ourselves and our own understanding of God's future with the eyes of Christians from other churches...'²⁰ These other Christians, in an ecumenical setting, help us 'to make sure that the voice of our [church] culture has not drowned out the voice of Jesus Christ'.²¹ Intentional ecumenism is crucial.

Mission Embracing Suffering

Another field which constantly requires revisiting is mission. This sounds almost trivial, as Baptists have always emphasised that they are missional people. 'We consider every [church] member a missionary,' as the 'father' of Continental Baptist mission, Johann Gerhard Oncken, once said.²² Mission is in the centre. Nevertheless, the need to interpret what is mission and in what ways a church is involved in mission is an ongoing process. It is a process of re-discovering the Biblical message of the Gospel and

¹⁸ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, p. 279.

¹⁹ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, p. xxv.

²⁰ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996), pp. 53-54.

²¹ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 54.

²² See Ian M. Randall, "'Every Apostolic Church a Mission Society': European Baptist Origins and Identity, in Anthony R. Cross, ed., *Ecumenism and History: Studies in Honour of John H. Y. Briggs* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), p. 281.

communicating this message in a changing context. The question is also how a ‘missionary’ perceives his or her role and lives out the ethos of mission.

The church is a missionary community and God is a missionary God. This view places mission primarily into the context of the doctrine of Trinity, and only subsequently into the context of ecclesiology and soteriology. God is a sending God, he sent his Son, and the Holy Spirit was sent. Mission is participating in the sending of God.²³

Discussion about the theology of mission and missionary theology is an integral part of Baptist identity. The perspective of *Missio Dei* opens up new horizons for baptistic self-understanding and for the vision of the world. The world is not only a passive receiver of the proclaiming activity of Christians, but God has been working in the world and continues to work – even beyond the Church’s words and deeds. If this is so then we can find signs of hope and God’s active presence also in the wider culture, not only within the ecclesial framework. Besides this, it makes baptistic disciples more modest in what they are doing as they realise that the primary focus is on God rather than on church’s programmes and ministries. David Bebbington has defined that one characteristic feature of evangelicals is activism.²⁴ However, a corrective emphasis on God’s active initiative is needed among evangelicals, in order to avoid losing ‘Theo-logical’ vision in the life of the Church.

This vision places primary focus on God’s trinitarian movement. The church participates in that movement. ‘The church exists within this dynamic movement to such an extent that mission has to be seen not as an added activity but as the defining essence of the church.’²⁵

Theological centrality of mission, and mission that embraces the reality of self-giving suffering of Christ, is worth of further exploration by Baptists, as they have frequently emphasised the importance of mission from functional rather than ontological perspective. With a little exaggeration: for us, Baptists, mission is often important because we do it, not because it defines us as a church or because we derive the missional meaning from the movement of the Trinity. Baptists, with a reputable legacy of William Carey and Baptist Missionary Society and innumerable other efforts, have contributed to the worldwide church the modern missionary movement. With this legacy they have an opportunity, even

²³ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll and New York: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 390.

²⁴ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989), pp. 10-12.

²⁵ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, p. 16.

responsibility, to explore deeper the theological grounds of mission. Mission is not only a Baptist practical project but a theological challenge.

There is another key word that recently has become widely used – holistic mission. This is an attempt to see the scope of mission more broadly than before. ‘It affects all people in all aspects of their existence. Mission is God’s turning to the world in respect of creation, care, redemption and consummation.’²⁶ Verbal proclamation is not enough.

Jesus explained his mission, using words from Isaiah 61, quoted in Luke 4:18-19 (NIV): ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’ This proclamation is inseparable from tangible healing and from actual release of the oppressed. In creation the pronounced word and the act of creation belonged together. In this sense, the question if mission is a verbal ministry or social action is a fruitless question. If mission is participating in the saving work of God, then it is a constant task for the church to bring these two aspects together.

The ethos of mission involves suffering. It is not just my church historian’s voice talking here, even if I am aware of the persecution of Anabaptists in the 16th century and I am informed of believers’ suffering under Communist regime. There are other contexts where mission – participating in God’s work – is closely linked to suffering: one may mention Central Asia or Middle-East. The topic of suffering may sound slightly embarrassing in Europe where the prevailing philosophy is that of comfortable consumerism. Believers are often ready to serve and help and give, on the condition that it does not endanger their *status quo*. However, mission is always going out, crossing boundaries, being pushed out of one’s comfort zone.

The pattern of God’s sending action is not just a communication of certain truths. It is an incarnational act. It is making the Gospel visible: In life and death and resurrection. Suffering is not primarily or exclusively a matter of feeling pain, or experiencing hardships or even martyrdom. It is about a costly commitment that may take different forms. Jesus Christ modelled this: ‘For even the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’ (Mark 10:45)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has inspired many by explaining the difference between ‘cheap grace’ and ‘costly grace’,²⁷ the latter leading to a deeper discipleship. Perhaps it is possible, even necessary, also to talk about costly

²⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 391.

²⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995).

mission. This mission is inseparable from a radical discipleship, radical commitment – ‘giving all one has to live on’ not just giving ‘out of one’s wealth’ – using the story of the widow’s offering (Mark 12:41-44). There is no definite, pre-formulated answer what this radical open-to-suffering-mission looks like in Europe. However one can recognise signs of it in different contexts: when learning about Baptists and other Christians serving Syrian refugees in the Middle East, pastors in Central-Asia standing firm to their faith under false accusations, Austrian Baptists building multi-national community of believers in Vienna, or a 22-year-old young man giving up his career and instead planting a church that seeks to reach out to high-school and university students in Estonia. This is partaking in service and suffering that can be considered as essential to the Baptist way of being a church.

Sacrificial Worship

Another major topic for Baptist ecclesiology – and spirituality – is worship. Worship, certainly, is not limited to the order of service, style of music or methods of preaching. The question of worship involves the theology of worship and worship as theology.²⁸

Leonard Sweet, an American author, wrote in 2000 about the culture of evangelical worship and its relationships with the surrounding postmodern context. Despite a difference in cultural context, his thoughts resonate also in European ecclesial scene. His main statement is that worship, in order to be relevant in present situation, should move towards four markers: first, it should be experiential, secondly, it should aim to be participatory, thirdly, it would benefit from being image-driven, and fourthly, it would increase its relevance by emphasising connectedness.²⁹ However, this is more about the ‘language’ of worship than about the content and meaning of worship, even if medium and message cannot be separated from each other.

If the church in a Baptist sense is a people of God being gathered, or being a ‘gathering church’ as Keith Jones has said, emphasising the dynamic aspect,³⁰ then worship has a central role in this ecclesial reality. Christopher Ellis, researching worship and spirituality in the Free Church tradition, concludes: ‘Worship is the place where the Church is gathered by God and becomes *ekklesia*; the place where God’s Word is encountered

²⁸ See Keith G. Jones and Parush R. Parushev, eds., *Currents in Baptistic Theology of Worship Today* (Prague: International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007). Cf. Christopher J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2004).

²⁹ Leonard Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman, 2000).

³⁰ Keith G. Jones, *A Believing Church* (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1998), p. 38.

communally and where the Church is confronted by its divine vocation.³¹ Belonging to a cultural tradition that borrowed significantly from the 19th century, a number of Continental European Baptist churches have settled the tone of their worship on performance, even entertainment of the audience, rather than the intentional awareness of God's work in history and today among his people. However, to quote Ellis again, it is in worship that the church 'regularly encounters God and is confronted with what God has done in the past and what God has promised for the future.'³²

With this reminder that worship is not an end in itself, but should lead towards God,³³ one could suggest that Baptist worship has a facet where a careful process of revisiting might prove necessary. This aspect could be called 'sacrificial worship.' In worship we meet not only triumphant Christ or Christ the Teacher. We meet also Christ who reveals sacrificial love, Christ who bows down to serve his disciples, and who says: 'Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.' (John 13:17) This leads a believer towards the spirituality of worship that takes God's presence and activity seriously and develops an ethos of servant spirit rather than that of a religious customer. 'It demands from us our very best and it carries about it something of a desire to please God...'³⁴

There is a saying that the congregation should be 'fed' by Sunday worship. This is a very severe diet if somebody eats only on Sunday morning. Worship should extend to everyday life and discipleship of a believer. Certainly, among Baptists, there has always been a sincere openness to learn regularly from the Word and to be strengthened by the Spirit. Nevertheless, the attitude of religious consumerism, limited to special events, is far from historical Baptist identity and far from a sound worship theology. Even if worship is an environment where several blessings are received, it is more about focus on God and about worshippers who are called together to offer their gifts to God, to celebrate His mighty works, to pray for the world in the wind of the Spirit and witness to Christ. This can be characterised as 'sacrificial worship.' 1 Corinthians 14:26 says: 'When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.' It all begins with bringing something for the common good. And it may not be only giving, but also giving up or giving away – with respect and sense of holy thankfulness.

³¹ Ellis, *Gathering*, p. 5.

³² Ellis, *Gathering*, p. 4.

³³ Ellis, *Gathering*, pp. 3-7.

³⁴ Jones and Parushev, eds., *Currents in Baptistic Theology of Worship*, p. 7.

Baptists would probably not fully agree with the position that worship, liturgy, is re-enacting Christ's sacrifice in a sacramental way. But God's sacrificial and liberating act of grace in Jesus Christ meets the community of believers as well as an individual Christians in worship. The Holy Spirit transforms the worshipping people into the increasing likeness of Christ while they bring their gifts to be offered for the glory of God and strengthening of the church: praying, singing, reading the scriptures, simply being present. 'All these activities must be acknowledged ecclesiology as constitutive for the church, for it is through these activities that people confess Christ before one another as Savior and Lord, and it is in this way that the Spirit of God constitutes them into a church.'³⁵ Giving rather than receiving is in the centre of sacrificial worship.

Conclusion

This paper has marked four areas where further theological reflection – inspired by the ecclesiological discussions and practices within European Baptist family – could take the believing communities further into the future. In no way is this an exhaustive list of important topics. However, this is my hope, that these issues touched upon previous pages are rooted deeply enough in the life of the church communities to enable new sprouts of continuing – and perhaps more detailed – conversations in Baptist churches and seminaries. This further discussion could involve human rights and religious freedom, specific questions in ethics, dynamics of local and universal church, aspects of baptistic identity, mission in postmodern and multicultural setting, Christian faith meeting the beliefs of Muslim neighbours.

This paper serves as a reminder of the following. Focus on theology is vitally relevant for Baptists – especially bringing theological tasks in the midst of the congregation and encouraging pastors to go beyond administrative work, and wrestle with theological questions. Ecumenical relations are for Baptists a forum to contribute to the wider church and to let themselves humbly to be tested by others – whether they are faithful to Jesus Christ. Mission involves radical commitment which cannot be separated from suffering, even if this may appear in different forms. And finally, worship takes God's presence and activity seriously, and overcomes the cultural pressure of consumerism – seeking to bring our gifts into the midst of a worshipping community, for the glory of God and for the benefit of His people. Seeking the way forward, Baptists (and baptists) may find these signs helpful for their journey. With words of John

³⁵ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 227

Robinson from 1620, ‘the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word.’³⁶

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³⁶ Quoted in Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 22.

Moving Towards an Ecumenism of *Koinonia*: A Critical Response to ‘The Church: Towards a Common Vision’ from a Baptistic Perspective¹

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Introduction

There is an apprehension among many Baptists that participation in ecumenical dialogue constitutes a grievous compromise that will lead to a diminishing of the distinctiveness of Baptist witness. The anti-ecumenical sentiment of some Baptists is often manifested in the fear that the ecumenical movement is paving the way towards a syncretistic liberal church, which subordinates the truth of the gospel to the claims of unity. My hope would be that some of these legitimate concerns would be allayed by the document, entitled, ‘The Church: Towards a Common Vision’.² This text raises salient issues that lie at the heart of baptistic³ and ecumenical identity. The text’s consistent focus on the Kingdom of God and the teachings of Jesus, together with the integration of mission and community (or *missio Dei* and *koinonia*) can be acclaimed by Baptists as core values that must be central to any ecumenical vision to which Baptists can contribute as enthusiastic participants.

Therefore, although this paper will highlight some potential shortcomings in the document and will raise some issues that seem to require further consideration, it should be asserted from the outset that this document offers a stimulating and helpful clarification of how far the churches have advanced in their common understanding of mission and the Kingdom of God. All of the critical comments concerning the document should thus be read against the backdrop of this sincere appreciation for the way that the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches has elucidated the key issues of current ecumenical dialogue.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was published as ‘Moving Towards an Ecumenism of *Koinonia* (baptistic perspective),’ *Testimonium fide*, Časopis pre teológiu a katechetiku (Slovak Republic), Číslo 2, Ročník 2 (2014), pp. 217-231, used here with the permission of the publisher.

² WCC, Faith and Order Paper no. 214, a pdf copy available on <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision>, last accessed on 06 February 2015.

³ For the term ‘baptistic’, see Lina Andronovienė and Parush R. Parushev, ‘Church, State, and Culture: On the Complexities of Post-soviet Evangelical Social Involvement’, *Theological Reflections*, EAAA Journal of Theology, No. 3 (2004), p. 194 (pp. 174-227). Cf. Parush R. Parushev, ‘Baptistic Convictional Hermeneutics,’ in Helen Dare and Simon Woodman, eds., *The Plainly Revealed Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2011), pp.172-190.

The Faith and Order Commission, which produced this document, has invited churches to submit official responses to the document by highlighting aspects of the life of the church that call for further discussion. Given this invitation, the question can be raised about what would be the most constructive way of responding to this appeal from a ‘baptistic’⁴ perspective. It would obviously be far beyond the scope of this brief critical response to offer a point-by-point analysis of all the issues addressed in the document. The aim of this article will thus be to highlight a brief sample of the most important issues and to elucidate and clarify them from an avowedly baptistic perspective. It should be made clear that I approach this text not as someone who is able to offer *the* Baptist perspective on the issues under discussion. Rather, I am responding to this document as one whose theological convictions have been formed by a particular tradition, which James McClendon, Keith G. Jones and Parush R. Parushev and others have called ‘baptist’ or ‘baptistic’. Whilst acknowledging the value and insights of this tradition, I adhere to it without believing that it embodies final and exclusive truth, and without thereby abandoning the hope that more can be learned from other traditions.⁵

It is important for all of us to acknowledge our situatedness and the unspoken assumptions and pre-critical judgements that shape and determine our ecumenical encounters. In my experience of involvement in the ecumenical movement, I have found that some participants often lack this kind of critical self-awareness and, as a result, they approach ecumenical dialogue in the same way that Narcissus approached the pool: they look into it only in order to find a reflection of the beauty of their own perspectives. Moreover, in ecumenical dialogue, people are often categorised into massive and clumsy categories, such as ‘Protestant’, ‘Catholic’ and ‘Orthodox’. These categories then create powerful identity

⁴ Note the intentionality of the lower-case ‘b’. The late Baptist theologian, James McClendon, used the adjective, ‘baptist’, in order to emphasise that the ‘baptist vision’ which he advocates is not confined to a specific ‘Baptist’ denomination, but encompasses a whole range of ‘baptistic’ expressions of Christianity, associated with the tradition of the Radical Reformation, including Baptists, Mennonites, Brethren, some expressions of Pentecostalism, and believers’ churches; McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1: Ethics*, revised edition (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002; originally 1986), pp. 26-34. This approach, admittedly, is not without its critics, even among scholars who are sympathetic towards those who favour the ‘baptistic’ rather than ‘Baptist label’. Paul Fiddes notes the danger that this label could be used to create ‘a highly personalized view of what it means to be baptist’; Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), p. 14. For the use of the term as a designation of community of believers in (Eastern-Central) European context, see ‘Editor’s Preface,’ in Rollin G. Grams and Parush R. Parushev, eds. *Towards an Understanding of European Baptist Identity: Listening to the Churches in Armenia, Bulgaria, Central Asia, Moldova, North Caucasus, Omsk and Poland* (Prague, CZ: IBTS Publisher, 2006), p.10.

⁵ Similar hope is expressed by Parush R. Parushev in his *Christianity in Europe: The way we are now* with a response by Vija Herefoss, Crowther Centre Monographs Series, Volume 9 (Oxford: Church Missionary Society, 2009), pp. 21-22.

clusters that develop into an ‘us’ and ‘them’ approach, causing people in these ‘camps’ to become defensive and distrustful of each other.

Therefore, when the committee of CEBTS⁶ invited me to offer a critical comment on this document, I decided to read it twice. On the first reading, I tried to suspend my critical judgement as much as possible in order to address the issue of how this document elucidates the virtues and shortcomings of baptistic ecclesiologies. I tried to understand what this text reveals about how I and my fellow Baptists might appear in the eyes of our ecumenical companions who produced this document. Only on the second reading did I begin to engage in a critical analysis of the document from my perspective as a Baptist.

Ecumenism and *Missio Dei*

Baptists can gladly acclaim the central insight of the document, which is summed up in the statement that the church is ‘essentially missionary, and unity is essentially related to this mission’ (p. 2). This basic contention in the introduction is reflected in the conclusion, which laments that, ‘Our brokenness and division contradict Christ’s will for the unity of his disciples and hinder the mission of the Church’ (p. 40). This is a significant insight because it highlights an important distinction between the means and ends of the ecumenical movement that is of particular concern to Baptists, but which is often inadequately addressed in ecumenical dialogue. The document suggests that the current disunity of the church is lamentable, not merely because division is inherently sinful or deplorable, but, above all, because it hinders God’s activity in saving and redeeming the world. In other words, the implication is that the *missio Dei*, rather than unity *per se*, is the ultimate aim or *telos* of the ecumenical movement.⁷ This is the central insight that Baptists can draw out of this document.

Recognising the central place of *missio Dei* as the object and point of departure of the whole of the church’s life would militate against dubious assumptions and exaggerated statements concerning the alleged missional significance of Church ‘sacraments’. It is not immediately apparent, for instance, how (as the document claims), ‘the celebration of the eucharist … enables the Church to participate in the mission of God for the transformation and salvation of the world’ (p. 2). This statement seems to be without foundation in Scripture or experience. As well as the lack of any reference to the eucharist in the Great Commission (Matthew 28), it is difficult to see any connection between *missio Dei* and the eucharist.

⁶ Consortium of European Baptist Theological Schools. See online at: www.cebts.eu.

⁷ Joshua T. Searle and Mykhailo N. Cherenkov, *A Future and a Hope: Mission, Theological Education and the Transformation of Post-Soviet Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), pp.130–35.

Moreover, I cannot see how the consumption of bread and wine by Christians in church buildings empowers or enhances the church's witness in the world.⁸ Still less do I see how, as the document puts it, 'the eucharist brings into the present age a new reality which transforms Christians into the image of Christ and therefore makes them his effective witnesses' (p. 25). This seems to be an exaggerated claim that is without scriptural warrant. According to the document, the Church 'reveals Christ to the world by proclaiming the Gospel' and 'by celebrating the sacraments' (p. 33). It is apparent how proclaiming the Gospel reveals Christ to the world; less clear is how the celebration of the 'sacraments' (which usually takes place inside church buildings) fulfils the *missio Dei*. The purported connection between mission and the celebration of the eucharist ought at least to be clarified and substantiated, rather than merely assumed and asserted, in any subsequent ecumenical discussion on these issues.

The Baptist Vision and the Issue of 'Legitimate' and 'Divisive' Diversity

The integration of ecumenism and *mission Dei* is relevant to the document's attempt to clarify what constitutes an appropriate balance between unity and diversity in the church's witness to the world. From a baptistic perspective one of the salient parts of the document is the discussion concerning 'legitimate' and 'divisive diversity' (p. 17). *Missio Dei* can be invoked to resolve some of the issues on which differences of opinion continue to hinder the saving work of God in the world. Taking *missio Dei* as the point of departure for ecumenical dialogue, it is possible to develop a vigorous criterion against which to distinguish between these two categories of diversity. On this basis, it can be argued that diversity which facilitates the *missio Dei* can be considered as 'legitimate diversity'; diversity, by contrast, that hinders the *missio Dei* should be rejected as 'divisive'.

It is on this point that I believe McClendon's baptist vision could be a useful aid to facilitate common discernment among ecumenical partners. In a recent essay published in the *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, I argued that the eschatological undercurrent of the baptist vision lends a powerful stimulus to the unity of the church.⁹ This article explained how McClendon developed the notion of the baptist vision as an 'organising

⁸ The alleged central place occupied by the eucharist in the life of the church and its witness to the world is reiterated throughout the document and is seen particularly in the term, 'especially in the Eucharist' (p. 11).

⁹ Searle, 'The Ecumenical Imperative and the Kingdom of God: Towards a baptistic perspective on church unity', *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 14 (September, 2013), pp. 5-23.

principle', which brings together diverse characteristics of baptistic identity, such as mission, community, biblicalism, liberty and discipleship.¹⁰ The baptist vision, according to McClendon, exhibits a radical 'awareness of the biblical story as our story ... of mission as responsibility for costly witness, of liberty as the freedom to obey God without state help or hindrance, of discipleship as life transformed into obedience to Jesus' lordship, and of community as daily sharing in the vision.'¹¹

It is this sense of continuity, sustained by an eschatological narrative, which renders the baptist vision not merely a useful internal orientation point for baptistic communities, but a means towards the enrichment of a common understanding of the distinction between 'legitimate' and 'divisive diversity' among diverse participants in contexts of ecumenical dialogue. By maintaining a 'shared awareness of the present Christian community as the primitive community and the eschatological community'¹², the baptist vision posits an eschatological point of departure that offers a potential criterion for determining the difference between 'legitimate' and 'divisive' diversity. This vision operates through the understanding that 'the church now is the primitive church and the church on the judgment day.'¹³ Based on this understanding of the eschatological continuity of the present church and the primitive church, the baptist vision acknowledges that there are several different (yet complementary) ways of participating in and thinking about the Christian faith. There are many different ways of following the crucified and risen Christ today and of living out our common eschatological vocation.

The eschatological orientation of the vision offers a positive criterion against which to determine whether aspects of church beliefs and practices constitute 'legitimate' or 'divisive' diversity. According to the baptist vision of the present church's radical shared awareness of and continuity with the primitive Christian community, all aspects of church beliefs and practice must be judged according to their fidelity to the eschatological culmination of the biblical narrative. Each ecclesial group that participates in the ecumenical conversation bears collective witness to this narrative which will culminate in the 'restitution of all things' (Acts 3:21) and will result in the kingdoms of this world being transfigured into the Kingdom of our Lord and God (Rev. 11:15). This narrative is neatly summarised by the New Testament scholar Richard B. Hays:

The God of Israel, the creator of the world, has acted (astoundingly) to rescue a lost and broken world through the death and resurrection of Jesus; the full

¹⁰ McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 32.

¹¹ McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 33.

¹² McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 30.

¹³ McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 30.

scope of that rescue is not yet apparent, but God has created a community of witnesses to this good news, the church. While awaiting the grand conclusion of the story, the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is called to re-enact the loving obedience of Jesus Christ and thus to serve as a sign of God's redemptive purposes for the world.¹⁴

The crucial test of faithfulness to this narrative is not whether our tradition or church background is Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox or Baptist, but whether our embodied life as the pilgrim people of God conforms to the eschatological vision of salvation and reconciliation.

This key criterion enjoins upon ecumenical partners the obligation to work creatively towards its realisation through the love and humility required of those who claim to follow the example of Christ. The ecumenicity of the baptist vision consists in its essentially trans-denominational nature and scope. The baptist vision can be expressed by any church that identifies itself as participating in the shared eschatological narrative that involves 'yoking God and humankind as co-partners in redemption',¹⁵ and which culminates in the coming of the Kingdom of God in all its fullness. The question of how this is attained will be answered differently by different groups of Christians.

Institutional Christianity and the Faith of the Gospel

A further problem with this document from the perspective of McClendon's baptist vision is that it gives too much credence to the notion that the church is a 'divinely instituted structure', rather than a living, organic and spiritual union of believers. This emphasis is apparent despite the promising characterisation of the church as 'the pilgrim people moving toward the kingdom of God' (p. 2). There are some churches that revere tradition to such an extent that the ministerial orders and institutional structures of the church are regarded as having been 'instituted by Christ himself for all time' (p. 14). It is thus argued that in apparent 'faithfulness to the gospel, Christians would have no authority fundamentally to alter this divinely instituted structure' (p. 14). Such thinking betrays a dangerous institutional foundationalism that promotes a distorted, utopian aspiration to reclaim a lost golden age of the Church. As Parushev rightly maintains, 'Jesus was more concerned with enactment of the coming of the kingdom rather than the establishment of the institution of a church.'¹⁶

¹⁴ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (London: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 193.

¹⁵ Michael Goldberg, cited in Parushev, 'Kingdom of God', p. 288.

¹⁶ Parushev, 'Kingdom of God/Heaven', in Briggs et al, *A Dictionary of European Baptist Life and Thought* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), p. 289.

Institutional commitments are also apparent in the notion of ‘apostolic succession’, which is avowed by some of our ecumenical partners. The Orthodox and the Catholic Church regard apostolicity as something conferred by the succession of bishops in an ordered church hierarchy. The chain of episcopal ordinations is said to link contemporary incumbents of the church hierarchy to the apostles as the authentic witnesses of the events that led to the birth of the Christian religion.¹⁷ The Protestant churches, by contrast, regard apostolicity as a matter of fidelity to the proclamation of the apostles.

Baptists have maintained that the message of Christ cannot be reduced to a set of rules and dogmas passed down by traditions. Fidelity to the gospel, for Baptists, is not a matter of being faithful to church tradition; nor is it a matter of returning to some utopian ideal supposedly represented by the early church; nor is it even simply a matter of espousing so-called ‘sound doctrine’. Rather, according to McClendon’s baptist vision, fidelity to the gospel means to live and believe in accordance with the vision inspired by the world-changing events that gave birth to the early church. McClendon maintains that, ‘we are Jesus’ followers; the commands are addressed directly to us.’¹⁸ As Parushev put it, the story of Jesus and his first disciples ‘is still the story that shapes our lives today.’¹⁹

According to the baptist vision of radical continuity between the early and contemporary church, the events that gave birth to the early church and which unleashed such a powerful and world-transforming missional movement in the first few centuries of the church, are as present now as they were at any time since then. These events of the ‘realistic narrative’²⁰ of the scriptures are as real and normatively-binding for the faith and practice of today’s churches as they were for the primitive churches described in the Book of Acts. We are sustained by the same vision and we remain faithful to the event that gave birth to Christianity not by imitation of rituals and dogma associated with tradition, but by advancing boldly into the new creation opened up by the events of incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection (2 Cor. 5:17).

¹⁷ Gunther Wenz, ‘Episkope im Dienst der Apostolizität der Kirche. Eine thematische Skizze im Lichte des lutherisch-anglikanischen Dialogs zum Bischofsamt’, in: Th. Schneider/G. Wenz (Hg.), *Das kirchliche Amt in apostolischer Nachfolge. I. Grundlagen und Grundfragen* (Freiburg/Göttingen 2004), pp. 38-67.

¹⁸ McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 32.

¹⁹ Parush R. Parushev, ‘Walking in the Dawn of the Light: On the Salvation Ethics of the Ecclesial Communities in the Orthodox Tradition from Radical Reformation Perspective’ (PhD thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2006), p. 109.

²⁰ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 16.

The Continuing Influence of Christendom Thinking on the Ecumenical Movement

This issue of so-called ‘apostolic succession’ is just one instance of the basic shortcoming of the document from the perspective of baptist and anabaptist ecclesiology: namely, its underlying allegiance to a Christendom model of ecclesiology. Although the document makes promising references to the role of the Church as a prophetic change-agent in society (p. 39), the very fact that the document has been produced by a central committee of a mainstream organisation like the WCC is indicative of one of the problems faced by the contemporary ecumenical movement. While the attempt to clarify points of common understanding among various churches may be laudable, the WCC should explicitly recognise the inherent limitations of its role as a centralised institution that attempts to facilitate multilateral unity through the publication of consensus documents and the organisation of ecumenical conferences.

Therefore, notwithstanding the many valuable and perceptive insights concerning the mission of the church in the world that this document contains, the approach to these issues could benefit from an appropriate humility, which understands the challenges as well as the opportunities of witnessing to the world as marginal communities in a post-Christendom context. Perhaps it would be appropriate in subsequent revisions of this document to use explicitly the language of ‘post-Christendom’ and to acknowledge openly that the church (at least in the West) finds itself in a post-Christendom missional context. This may also offer scope to incorporate important anabaptist themes as a means towards the expansion and enrichment of mainstream ecumenical discourse.

Christendom thinking posits the illusion that the church continues to occupy a place of privilege at the centre of society. Post-Christendom delineates a context in which Christian attitudes and values are no longer the dominant factors shaping Western culture. Baptist – and particularly anabaptist – communities (with certain historical exceptions)²¹ have tended to stand outside of the religious and political mainstream of public life. Living in post-Christendom is therefore regarded by Baptist and anabaptist communities not as an unfortunate disappearance of an alleged golden age in which the church wielded power, but as a natural and appropriate condition of living in the world as the people of God and serving a Lord

²¹ A notable is the so-called ‘moral majority’, which was heavily implicated in mainstream politics in the USA in the 1980s, was led by fundamentalist evangelicals from the Southern Baptist Convention. See Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptists and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002).

who willingly relinquished power and earthly status for the sake of love (Phil 2:5-11).²²

As the church moves from the centre to the margins and makes the transition from privilege to plurality, these shifts will have important implications for how we think about mission in relation to the ecumenical task.²³ This issue should be addressed or at least mentioned in any future publication by the Faith and Order Commission. In post-Christendom mission will not be regarded as inviting people into the fold of a church institution, but will be understood more in terms of enabling people to participate in God's saving activity in the world in radical, creative and diverse ways that integrate life and faith. In light of the 'post-Christendom shift', the church needs a new ecumenical vision, which, as Stuart Murray notes, 'will be different from the imposed hierarchical unity of Christendom. It will be organic, missional and messy – but perhaps more effective than twentieth-century efforts to foster unity by consultations, official statements and denominational mergers.'²⁴

The Root Causes of Disunity

Another basic shortcoming of this document is its assumption that the fundamental causes of disunity and division among various churches are primarily matters of doctrinal disagreement on specific issues, such as the sacraments, ordination, apostolic succession, Eucharist and baptism. On closer inspection, however, as H. Richard Niebuhr persuasively argued, disunity in the church reflects not doctrinal disagreement, but the church's compliance with divisive socio-economic forces such as free-market capitalism and socio-political ideologies, such as nationalism and racism.²⁵ In order to overcome such divisions, the ecumenical movement must be sustained by a vision of a transfigured world and the fusion of the entire human community. This vision of a 'church without walls'²⁶ is expressed in terms of the Kingdom of God, which constitutes a spiritual fellowship without barriers or distinctions of any kind.²⁷

²² Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), pp. 239-50.

²³ See e.g. Wilbert R. Shenk, 'Mission and Marginality', in Wilbert R. Shenk and Peter F. Penner, eds., *Anabaptism and Mission* (Erlangen, Germany: Neufeld Verlag Schwartzenfeld, 2007, published in co-operation with IBTS as Proceedings of IBTS Directors' Conference "Anabaptism and Mission," Prague, 30 January – 3 February 2006), 227-246. On the contemporary Christian witness from the centre and the margins of the societal power, see Parush R. Parushev, 'Mission as established presence and prophetic witness in culturally Orthodox Contexts', in Mihai Malancea and Vladimir Ubeivolc (eds.), *Evangelical Mission in the Eastern European Orthodox Contexts: Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova and Ukraine* (Chisinau, Moldova: Universitatea Divitiae Gratiae, 2013), pp. 57-111.

²⁴ Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), p. 68.

²⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1929).

²⁶ Searle and Cherenkov, *Future and Hope*, pp. 91–99.

²⁷ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. B. Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. xvii.

Therefore the Kingdom of God, rather than any particular model of ecclesial organisation or hierarchy, must be both the object and point of departure of all our ecumenical endeavours. The Kingdom of God both encompasses and transcends any particular church community. This understanding of the Kingdom of God should engender an element of humility born of the conviction that the full realisation of the Kingdom can be compared to an ever-receding horizon that will evade all our efforts to dominate it or to grasp it completely. The conviction that one church group embodies in an exclusive way the true fulfilment of the Kingdom vision is antithetical to the true spirit of ecumenism. Moreover, if a particular church that makes such a claim assumes that this privileged status confers upon it the right to impose its own structures on others, it thereby deviates from the true ecumenical vision of unity in diversity in favour of insipid forms of uniformity and institutional hierarchy.

Conclusion: Moving Towards an Ecumenism of *Koinonia*

From my experience of involvement in ecumenical gatherings, it seems that one of the basic problems with the ecumenical movement today is that we continue to profess our intellectual adherence to the concept of ecumenism, but as soon as the ecumenical discussions have finished – as soon as the ink is dry on the documents of doctrinal consensus and the expressions of goodwill have been exchanged – we all go off back to our own churches and continue to participate materially in structures that preclude any kind of meaningful engagement in ecumenical *koinonia*.

One regrettable aspect of contemporary ecumenism (at least in Western Europe) is that it has tended to be an overwhelmingly middle class, bourgeois enterprise. The ecumenical agenda tends to be set by committees composed of privileged representatives of the mainline denominations. Baptist history and experience teaches us that the most valuable and edifying theological reflection is produced not in committee rooms of ecumenical commissions nor in the armchairs of theological faculties that are occupied by tenured, comfortable academic professionals. Rather, the most valuable and beneficial theological reflection is produced by those outside of mainstream academic and church life; by those who recognise with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others that ‘theology means struggle’.²⁸ Recognising the struggle and pathos of theological reflection, it may be that ecumenical theology could benefit from taking a more avowedly polemical and critical stance. The desire for order and harmony

²⁸ McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 17.

can degenerate into insipid orderliness and uniformity, which is antithetical to the true spirit of ecumenism. As our Baptist tradition teaches us through a long history of persecution and discrimination, theological reflection thrives on creative tension and edifying conflict.

The document could address these issues by moving away from the usual ‘propositional’ and ‘magisterial’ forms of ecumenism towards a ‘grassroots’ and ‘kerygmatic’ ecumenism that aims not at bland consensus, but at building missional communities and deep friendships between Christians of diverse convictional perspectives. Therefore, with appropriate humility, Baptists can remind the ecumenical movement of the need to move beyond declarative ecumenism to warmer and deeper expressions of *koinonia*. This calls for the establishment of a genuine and holistic ecumenism that goes beyond the polite discussions and pleasantries that are typically exchanged among high-level denominational dignitaries at official ecumenical consultations.

In the final analysis our commitment to church unity will be decided not by the words that we utter or by the statements of doctrinal consensus to which we can give our assent, but by the redeemed life of transformed faith communities that reflect the unity in diversity of the Holy Trinity. The doctrinal issues on specific points of ecclesiology with which the ecumenical movement is concerned are best approached not as problems to be dissected by theological analysis, but as mysteries in which to participate and truths to be transformed by. In the same way that Lesslie Newbigin once said that ‘the only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it’,²⁹ so is it the case that the only true ecumenical hermeneutic is an embodied *koinonia* of disparate believers whose unity in diversity reflects the Trinitarian nature of God.³⁰ Most of all, we need to recognise that the ecumenical imperative is – in its most important and fundamental essence – an expression of the love of God and a manifestation of the anguished heart cry of Christ that his church should be one (John 17:21).

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²⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 227.

³⁰ Johannes Oeldemann, *Einheit der Christen: Wunsch oder Wirklichkeit? Kleine Einführung in die Ökumene* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2009), p. 183.

The Importance, Relevance, and Challenge of 'The Church: Towards a Common Vision'

Alexander Abramov, Alexander Geichenko, Mary Raber

This paper includes three voices. Alexander Abramov introduces the theme and Alexander Geichenko concludes it. Mary Raber is translator and editor and also has added comments.

Alexander Abramov: We were asked to speak to this theme from the point of view of Ukrainian and Russian Baptists, but possibly other Eastern European Baptist fellowships will resonate with these thoughts as well. The first and most obvious thing to say is that *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* is, indeed, important, relevant and challenging. No one can deny that the issue of church unity is crucial to Christian theology, yet—here comes the challenge—we inhabit a part of the world where that unity seems particularly difficult to live out, or even think about. This, of course, is closely bound up with our history as a minority faith in Imperial Russia, in the Soviet Union, and now in the post-Soviet world (which sometimes doesn't feel so post-Soviet anymore)—and sometimes it is very difficult to untangle history from theology. So while we love fellowship, and we love God's people, we are a little suspicious of religious movements, suspicious of documents, suspicious of the ecumenical movement and what it might try to make us do. We live in the shadow of large churches with claims on nationality—what it means to be Ukrainian or Russian—and some people who identify themselves with those churches think that we have no right to exist.

On the other hand, somewhere deep inside, we know we have to read and study documents such as *Towards a Common Vision*, because, as it says in the introduction, they provide “an occasion for the churches to reflect upon their own understanding of the Lord’s will.”¹ Theological education is still quite a new enterprise in our post-Soviet setting, and one of our functions as Christians in the academy is to reflect, recognise, and make connections, and try to help people in the churches to do the same thing. We are only beginning to create safe places for people to talk about church unity.

I will begin the reflection process by responding to chosen excerpts from *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*:

¹ WCC, Faith and Order Paper no. 214, p. 2; a pdf copy of the document is available on <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision>, last accessed on 06 February 2015.

“The Church is catholic because of the abundant goodness of God ‘who desires everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Tim. 2:4).”²

Neither in Russia, nor in Ukraine have Baptist churches ever thought of themselves as being “catholic” in this sense. Much of the time one could call our way of defining church as sectarian. Sometimes we are accused of being sectarian, but we also embrace sectarianism. Here are some reasons why:

1. We have an exclusivist definition of what it means to be a church. Orthodox believers were normally considered beyond the limits of the true church.
2. This is so due to the oppressive position of the Orthodox Church toward Protestants in general and to Baptists in particular.
3. Also, we have a strong belief and expectation that the true church is supposed to be persecuted and one would never dare to say that about a state church. Furthermore, the true church according to the Eastern European Baptists is never to become a part of secular society and culture. This “Christ against culture” position was developed historically while fighting against the communist worldview.
4. Even today our Baptist churches have a hard time partnering with other evangelical churches—that is, churches of other Protestant confessions. Some of our Baptist seminary students have difficulty accepting the fact that Pentecostals as well as other believers are also welcome to enter the student body.

“The essential catholicity of the Church is undermined when cultural and other differences are allowed to develop into division.”³

Here I would say we may observe a sort of a philosophical pessimism toward reality in our worldview. We usually do say that there are things—cultural and other differences—that were given a chance to develop. If there are some divisions and they are the result of some “development” then it is God Who sanctioned that thing, and things just have to be that way. Our part is to endure those things and thus become even godlier. In fact, those divisions are created sometimes to bring us to unity.

“Christians are called to remove all obstacles to the embodiment of this fullness of truth and life bestowed upon the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit”.⁴

If the word “remove” is used in a political or any other context, then our understanding is rather philosophically passive. Our part is just to follow God and His commandments and if, while doing so, we happen to remove some obstacle, then all the glory is due to God anyway.

² Ibid., p. 14.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Thus, there is a strong element in Ukrainian/ Russian Baptist experience that makes us rather pessimistic and passive, but that is not the whole story. For one thing, suffering is meant to be a creative witness; perhaps that has been our part in the worldwide church. For another, Ukrainian and Russian Baptists have also always been strong preachers and evangelists. At the same time we are aware that God is sending changes into our world that require us to submit to being transformed. We admit to needing to find new ways of being the church.

“The Gospel needs to be proclaimed in languages, symbols and images that are relevant to particular times and contexts so as to be lived authentically in each time and place.”⁵

This statement seems to represent a challenge in the way it calls us to review our language, symbols and images and make them more relevant towards our context. It was generally accepted in our churches that those things are unchangeable. But since church membership is dropping drastically we have to change something.

Mary Raber: Here it is possible that the current unrest in Ukraine is showing us some new ways of living authentically. I was amazed when a friend of mine, a Baptist, told me that she had memorised a prayer to the Virgin Mary in Ukrainian in order to be able to recite it together with others on the *Maidan* square in Kiev in late autumn 2013. The challenge, I think, is not to let those expressions of unity (or at least of solidarity) become merely patriotic or nationalistic. I am more edified by the witness of a group of believers—Pentecostal, Baptist, Orthodox, and others—who are carrying on a “Prayer marathon” in the centre of Donetsk and have met daily for well over 100 days. They have been beaten and arrested and their tent has been torn down and their flags stolen, but they persist. I pray for them as a group who are creating a kind of “holy dissonance” in that troubled city. They would not be there if there was no war.

“Strengthened and nourished by the liturgy, the Church must continue the life-giving mission of Christ in prophetic and compassionate ministry to the world and in struggle against every form of injustice and oppression, mistrust and conflict created by human beings.”⁶

Alexander Abramov: Being for so long on the fringe of our society it is a great challenge for our churches to act the way it is described in this document. That means to change ourselves from the inside out. In fact our seminaries help us here a great deal.

Mary Raber: The educational task of the academy has only been undertaken rather recently—about twenty-five years ago—by Baptists and other Protestant

⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

⁶ Ibid., p. 39.

groups. Yet clearly there are things that educational institutions have been able to do, such as provide space for the churches to discuss historical and theological issues in a relatively neutral academic setting.

Alexander Geichenko: Roman Catholics, evangelicals in the Lausanne Congresses, and the ecumenical movement, as expressed in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* have all used the image of the People of God to describe the role of the church. I recommend that image as helpful for Eastern European Baptists in the twenty-first century.⁷

Baptist theology has given most attention to the image of the church as a congregation (meeting, *sobranie* in Russian) without giving adequate attention to the idea of the people of God. Paul Sevier Minear has warned us of the danger of narrowing and simplifying the complex and rich reality of the church, drawing it down into one image, in this case of the congregation.⁸ Therefore, as a corrective, we must try to get past the framework of the model of the congregation and focus instead on images that have a broader application. The image of the people of God may be useful for the following reasons:

1. It takes us from discontinuity to continuity. We have tended toward the idea of discontinuity in the providence of God, probably because of the predominance of the dispensationalist model in post-Soviet theology. The image of the people of God reminds us that the church is not something provisional, but has existed in God's providence from the beginning and has the goal of blessing all people.
2. It brings us from the congregation to the community. The people of God image allows us to recognise the congregation, while taking down its barriers. Every congregation represents the people of God, because it consists of those called by God by means of His Word and the Spirit to obedience and following after the Lord Jesus Christ, and also to the fulfilment of the calling to be a sign and messenger of the Kingdom of God.
3. It moves us from agreement in the form of documents to God's election. We know that early Baptist ecclesiology was closely linked to charters or covenants among church members. If taken to extremes, this concept leaves the church as a mere social reality, a society of like-minded people. The image of the people of God allows us to correct that concept, strengthen the key role of God in election, calling, and assigning of mission to the people of God. In this way the vertical dimension of Baptist ecclesiology is sharpened, allowing us to consider the church in its relation to God and not only in relation to members of the congregation.

⁷ Geichenko's contribution is excerpted from a public presentation made in Odessa in 2013 entitled, "The Image of the Church as the People of God in Contemporary Ecclesiology."

⁸ *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, foreword by Leander E. Keck (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004; originally published 1960 by Westminster Press).

4. It moves us from attending the “meeting” (*sobranie*) to mission. Although the traditional Baptist concept of the church had a missional dimension, the image of the people of God strengthens this, because it implies that the elect people of God has a calling to witness to the coming rule of God and embodies this in the life of the new age. The image of the people of God gathering to worship the Lord and then returning to the world to fulfil its basic calling, helps to connect worship and witness.
5. It moves us from the static to the dynamic. The image of the congregation in Baptist ecclesiology is sufficiently active, but not as dynamic as the image of the people of God. The people of God moving out to the ends of the earth until the end of time allows us to relate critically to any attempt to be fortified in this life, win respect and recognition, and become part of the surrounding world through loyalty to the power structures of this age. The people of God have no permanent city here but are searching for a city whose foundation and creator is God. And if the church is still on the way, it must be critical of itself and all claims to exclusivity and sinless-ness. The people of God have still not become what they actually are.
6. It brings us from institutionalisation to the ministry of the whole people of God. Unfortunately, the tendency in the organisation of ministry in Baptist churches has highlighted the organisational and administrative talents of the pastor, the “star,” and has tended to lower the significance of the community of saints. The image of the people of God helps to put everything in its proper place: first of all the general calling and worthiness of all representatives of the Church to be priests of God and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, and then the gifts of service, essential for building up the Church and forming disciples. The experience of the Catholic Church testifies to the striking changes that came about through turning to this model during and after the Second Vatican Council.
7. We move from sameness to unity. Finally, the image of the people of God allows us to recognise both unity and diversity and escape attempts to make everything exactly the same. It presumes the presence and harmonious co-existence of different peoples, genders, ages, social classes, gifts, and “levels of holiness.” The unity of the Church consists in its relationship to God, in the recognition of the whole people to be witnesses and signs of the Kingdom of God, and not some kind of attempts to limit and fashion each after a certain model.

Thus, the image of the church as the people of God is well-represented in the ecclesiology of the twenty-first century. Of course, we have to keep it in perspective with other images of the Church that we find in Scripture: Considering the image of the people of God in connection to other images—the Body of Christ, the communion of saints, the Bride of Christ, the temple of God—we gain entrance to the source from which a mighty stream of living

water flows. We desperately need to reconcile our horizons with the horizons of the biblical authors. Only in doing this we can hope that the church of our time will fill its sails with fresh wind.

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Four Views and a Response on WCC Church Vision

Octavian D. Baban

Introduction

In the last four decades the WCC documents have raised a number of important issues for the Church everywhere, both theological and practical, as a help to reaffirming and re-adjusting the vision on ministry and unity in diversity of various Christian Churches and denominations. After releasing the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* paper in 1982, the new booklet on *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2012) has proved to be a well researched and balanced document emphasizing the need for reciprocal awareness of the other and for a right perception of the general need for Christian unitary vision.

For a beginning, it is important to note the four chapters of the WCC paper, focusing in turn on (1) God's mission and the Unity of the Church; (2) The Church and the Triune God; (3) The Church: Growing in Communion; and (4) The Church: In and for the World. The main goal of the document is stated from the beginning as a wish to contribute to the ecumenical dialogue in three specific ways:

(1) by providing a synthesis of the results of ecumenical dialogue about important ecclesiological themes in recent decades; (2) by inviting them to appraise the results of this dialogue – confirming positive achievements, pointing out deficiencies and/or indicating areas that have not received sufficient attention; and (3) by providing an occasion for the churches to reflect upon their own understanding of the Lord's will so as to grow toward greater unity (cf. Eph. 4:12-16).¹

For reasons such as these, *Church and Vision* has been selected to provide the main theme of the CEBTS Conference in Radość near Warsaw, 2-5 of July, 2014. Although not all the unions of Baptist Churches in Europe are members of the WCC, and this is often reflected in the general orientation of the Baptist Theological Colleges in those countries, the CEBTS Conference has facilitated a much needed discussion. It was supported by the contributions of Karen Smith, 'A Baptist Vision of the Church' (Wales, UK); Alexander Abramov, Alexander Geichenko and Mary Raber, 'Importance, relevance and challenge of *The Church*:

¹ WCC Central Committee, *The Church - Towards a Common Vision*, Doc. No. GEN 06, p. 2, available on http://www.oecumene.nl/files/Documenten/The_Church_-_Towards_a_common_Vision.pdf, last accessed on 09 February 2015.

Towards a Common Vision' (Odessa, Ukraine), Teun van der Leer, 'A Believer's Church Response 1967-2008' (Amsterdam, NL) and Tony Peck, 'The Word of God and the Life of the Church: background, broader perspective and challenges' (EBF, UK).

The present response includes a review and a subsequent general assessment of the first three papers mentioned above, including a short critique of the WCC document, as well. As such, it raises three main issues, often seen from a Biblical studies perspective, which have the connotations of looking for the mind of Christ while looking for a Baptist vision of the Church, the vision and the limits of a community-integrated Baptist Church, and the possibility and the role of a minimalist Baptist Church in the present postmodern setting.

The mind of Christ and a Baptist vision of ministry: suffering and proclamation

As pointed out in the Smith's paper, the Church displays three main characteristics, as major features of her identity, that is, a) the Church is being gathered by God (thus, she is a dynamic body, and it is not an already gathered church that gathers others to it; the human participation in this is played down with the aim of highlighting God's role in defining and leading the development, the growth of his church, as *missio dei*); b) the Church as a servant of Christ should minister to the suffering and should herself share in the suffering of Christ (in this way, the Church would be more relevant in a postmodern age, when people are not so much interested in the argument for the gospel, as in the ethics and the theology of a believer); and c) the Baptist Churches need to continually seek the mind of Christ in order to explore the new opportunities in ministry (thus being able to grow and be ready for changes ahead). Consequently, one could develop better models for the Church's presence and action in the world, a perspective shared to a certain extent in the 4th section of the WCC Church Vision paper, where the Church is seen as a sacrament, a mystery of Christ's presence in the world.² This view represents, in fact, an older conclusion in the Christian world, as John Chrisostom emphasised that the Church has two altars, one in the Church and one in society 'among the poor, the suffering, and those in distress'.³

As a counter balance, however, one could think that there can be more ways of sharing in Christ's ministry, apart from partaking in his suffering and ministering for people in need, and one could think, for example, of being part of Christ's ministry in terms of proclaiming the kingdom and building the community through friendship and fellowship,

² WCC, *Common Vision*, p. 13.

³ J. Chrisostom, *Homily 50*, 3-4, pp. 58, 508-509, quoted in WCC, *Common Vision*, p. 31, note 68.

through prayer and studying of the Word of the Lord. This is as much a part of the *missio dei* of the Church, as it is the sharing in the suffering of Christ. In one of his speeches in Sinaia, Romania (2010), Ravi Zacharias was quoting F. Schaffer on the fast dawning era of Bible illiteracy in Western Christianity. Hosea 4:6 states that ‘my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. - Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children’ (NIV). Jesus’ teaching and proclaiming ministry needs to be continued if one would like to dream of healthy Baptist churches, with an effective ministry in the world.

In particular, one of Smith’s very dynamic concepts has been the following of ‘the mind of Christ’ in life of the Church, by which she mainly advocated the need of keeping an open mind in view of new developments and ways of ministry, as a Church and as individuals. However, in the perspective mentioned, above, one could emphasise, as well, a few other important connotations of the phrase. As a NT concept, it does come mainly from Philippians 2:5, ‘φρονεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν ὁ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, *phroneite en humin ho kai en Christo Iesou*’ (think among yourselves [the thought] that also was in Christ), and 1 Corinthians 2:16c, ‘ἡμεῖς δὲ νοῦν Χριστοῦ ἔχομεν., *hemeis de noun Christou echomen*’ (we, however, have the mind of Christ). In Philippians, the general context is that of Church unity, humility and total obedience to God – similar to Jesus’ example – and in contrast with Adam’s example, and this entirely supports the views exposed in Smith’s paper. In 1 Corinthians 2 the issue is that of the need to understand the mind of God, through the Spirit of God, in order to live and preach the Gospel effectively, with spiritual results, not according to human rules of persuasion. This would certainly support both the general encouragement to practical ministry, among the suffering and the needy, and the proclaiming and teaching ministry in view of challenging the secular approaches to spiritual growth, leadership and ministry. Looking for the mind of Christ in the development of Baptist Churches, would mean then not only paying attention to the various opportunities for change and new paradigms (such as ecumenical developments, ministry challenges, social concerns, etc.), yet, as well, for a solid equipping in that knowledge of Scripture that offers comfort, strength, identity, and mediates the presence of the Lord himself (2 Tim. 3:16): A ministry of comforting as well as a ministry of proclamation and teaching.

The importance of an inclusive and community integrated Baptist Church

Choosing for their paper the literary sub-genre of a series of short commentaries on selected paragraphs from the WCC *The Church: Towards*

a *Common Vision*, Abramov, Geichenko and Raber brought the reader as close as possible to the original WCC text, bringing in a rich series of comments drawn from the experiences and perspectives of the present day Ukrainian Baptist churches. This approach brings forth the new relevance of the imagery of the people of God for present day Baptist churches.

In this joint paper, Abramov focused on two major topics from the WWC paper, the issue of catholicity and that of cultural contextualisation, asking in what sense the Baptist Churches have indeed reached a Catholic understanding of themselves and of their place in the larger body of the Church of Christ.⁴ In a self-critique of the Baptist Churches in the Eastern European countries, he drew attention to the fact that the Baptist churches are too often hiding behind their traditions and sub-cultures, while exaggerating in their use of the social paradigm of *Christ against culture*.⁵ This could be a case of being or becoming captive to the local cultural barriers, a phenomenon that is manifest in society at large and also in the Baptist or Orthodox churches as well as in various other institutions, and has a tendency to reproduce (and continue) the local contradictions and enmities.⁶ Thus, Abramov emphasised the need for a broader understanding of the Baptist participation or share in the Catholicity of the Church.

In the second part of the joint paper Geichenko focused on a different concept, on the imagery of the people of God and its relevance in Baptist Churches.⁷ After a short historical and theological review of the metaphor, he emphasised seven general features of it: 1. this imagery takes us from discontinuity to continuity (the people of God has been present in all ages, in a form or another); 2. It brings us from the local congregation to the larger community (enlarging one's vision and relevance); 3. It takes us from an agreement to a human document (a creed, or a document such as the WCC paper), to the concept of election into a community, as an act of God; 4. It moves the reader from a focus on the community to a focus on world mission; 5. It moves the reader from a static to a dynamic view of the Church (mission to the kingdoms of the earth, while the Church has no kingdom on earth); 6. It brings the Church from institutionalisation to a complex and developed ministry; and 7. It takes the Church from uniformity to unity in variety (both denominationally and historically,

⁴ Catholicity is mentioned several times in WCC, *Common Vision*, e.g. p. 11, par. 30, p. 14, par. 31, p. 15, par. 65, p. 30, etc.

⁵ See, H.R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*. New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1951 (First Harper Torch Book, 1956). He wrote about five major paradigms: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox and Christ transforming culture. Abramov did not refer to the other possible paradigms or to alternative ways of ministering for Christ in adversity, in a less welcoming culture for evangelicals.

⁶ As Smith remarked during the Conference debates.

⁷ Written mainly in relation to section 'The Prophetic, Priestly and Royal People of God' of the WCC *Church and Vision* document, pp. 9-10.

across the various forms taken by the communities of the people of God). Some of the presented concepts made even more sense in their Slavic linguistic form being, apparently more intuitive when defined as such yet still fully understandable in English in translation as well (e.g., *sobranie*, gathering, community).

Among the issues sprung up during the debates at the conference, one could count the discussion on the meaningfulness of the Church in its cultural context (T. Pilli), where people, despite their differences in theology, could often act instinctively towards cooperation (M. Raber). The problem is that, at the level of personal relationships there are many ecumenical links in the spirit of Christian sisterhood among denominations and Churches, yet at the official level, the unity of the people of God is not affirmed with the same vigour or honesty, neither it is very visible, at least not in all countries (Otniel Bunaciu). And, indeed, as Peck noted, this can be seen at the level of WCC membership level. Only a few European Baptist bodies participate to the WCC: The rest having been affiliated to the CEC, the Council of European Churches (the Baptist Unions of Denmark, UK, Italy, Hungary, and the European Baptist Federation, EBF)⁸. The Roman Catholic Church is not part of WCC, as well as a significant number of Eastern Orthodox Churches, including the Romanian EOC. As a result, the section on ‘The Prophetic, Priestly and Royal People of God’ in the WCC paper on Common Vision, the one referring to the people of God, cannot claim to represent in a very generous and inclusive manner the positions and experience of all the European Baptist Churches or of the European Churches in general. By way of contrast, a number of other participants in the conference stressed that in other European countries the ecumenical experience still remains a positive one, despite theological and ecclesiological differences (as in Estonia – Einike Pilli, or in Germany – Michael Rohde).

In conclusion, there appears to be a certain difference between the ways in which the unity of the people of God, the Church, is perceived and practiced in general, in the Western and, respectively, in the Eastern countries of Europe. One major problem, however, is the fact that, regardless their Western or the Eastern European perspective, the Baptist Churches along with the Brethren and Pentecostal denominations and other evangelicals are not recognised as valid Churches by the Roman Catholic Church, only as *ecclesial communities* (communities of faith),⁹ while the Eastern Orthodox Churches do not even have such a concept (they accept these evangelical churches as social partners, via the state, or as religious partners, via the state or international bodies, yet not as a church or an

⁸ Cf. the list at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/list>, accessed on 5th of July, 2014.

⁹ Cf. *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church*, Second edition, pp. 817-819 on Wounds to unity.

acceptable community of faith or Christian sisterhood). Such a state of affairs represents a major obstacle in the way of a real, significant, and functioning ecumenical movement.

That being said, isolationism should be avoided as it brings with it the real danger of anchoring or holding a Church captive to a certain culture and history (Smith). Baptists have had from the very beginning a high interest in cultural relevance and were aware of the dangers of becoming isolated and sectarian. The Particular Baptist Confession of 1677 and 1689 mentioned in clear terms the need that ‘each Church, and all the Members of it are bound to pray continually, for the good and prosperity of all the Churches of Christ, in all places’.¹⁰ This integrationalist, or Catholic perspective, on the Baptist Churches could be seen as an appealing invitation to raise the profile of their relevance in society. However, as the Ukrainian experience shows, the effect of such efforts can be subject to the general mood and paradigms of a given society. In the last two decades, Ukraine has experienced an unparalleled growth in Baptist membership and number of churches only to witness in the last two years a sharp decline in audience and following, especially in the separatist pro-Russian areas of Donetsk and Luhansk, where people lay aside their newer cultural and theological identification with the evangelicals in order to return to a renewed allegiance to the Russian Orthodox Church. Thus, the present day Ukrainian Baptists in these areas are a vivid testimony of the need to use opportunities and windows of ministry and witnessing as long as they are opened. For reversals are possible and Christian persecution is not entirely out of books. This draws attention to the fact that Church dynamics in a time of persecution is changing and might follow different growth paradigms. In the world at large this is specifically true of the Baptist Churches in Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Egypt, and Indonesia. And as such it is surprising to note that the WCC *Church and Vision* document mentions only once the word persecution in its entire body, in par. 65:

It is altogether appropriate for believers to play a positive role in civic life. However, Christians have at times colluded with secular authorities in ways that condoned or even abetted sinful and unjust activities. The explicit call of Jesus that his disciples be “salt of the earth” and “light of the world” (cf. Matt. 5:13-16) has led Christians to engage with political and economic authorities in order to promote the values of kingdom of God, and to oppose policies and initiatives which contradict them. This entails critically analysing and exposing unjust structures, and working for their transformation, but also supporting initiatives of the civil authorities that promote justice, peace, the

¹⁰ The 1677-89 London Baptist Confession of Faith, Chapter 26: Of the Church, art. 14, cf. also S.E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, Durham, UK: Evangelical Press, 1989.

protection of the environment and the care for the poor and the oppressed. In this way Christians are able to stand in the tradition of the prophets who proclaimed God's judgment on all injustice. This will very likely expose them to *persecution* [italics mine] and suffering. The servanthood of Christ led to the offering of his life on the cross and he himself foretold that his followers should expect a similar fate. The witness (*martyria*) of the Church will entail, for both individuals and for the community, the way of the cross, even to the point of martyrdom (cf. Matt. 10:16-33).¹¹

Or, to be sure, persecution and afflictions are a continuing and major environment and *modus vivendi* of the Church, as it can be seen in Acts 14:22, 1 Thessalonians 1:6, and John 16:33, 'I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!' (NRS).

Ecclesiological minimalism and Baptist Worship Paradigms

In his attempt to define an acceptable and realistic form of ecumenism that would be able to secure and affirm Baptist identity, Van der Leer tried to address the problem of Baptists being recognised as a proper Church. Starting from a motto according to which 'that all Churches will be in the 21 century Believers' Churches,'¹² he suggested a minimalist definition of the Church as the best paradigm for the future. According to this model, Baptist churches and in general all Believers' Churches traditionally display an institutional "thickening" tendency of the Church that soon becomes dominated by 'church activity and mannerisms, traditions', by *Kirklichkeit*. In other words, this is the danger of becoming 'too churchy' by adding extra-requirements in order to be and function as a Church, which in practice turns into a sort of 'grace plus something' theology, or *sola fide plus* theology (this term opened one of the hottest debates of the conference and of the nicest, at the same time, especially in relation to Baptism and Eucharist).

As Van der Leer referred implicitly and explicitly to the section 'The Essential Elements of Communion: Faith, Sacraments, Ministry' of the WCC paper, he tried to deal with a threefold issue: that of the recognition of the Baptists as a Church; that of considering the sacramental nature of Eucharist and Baptism – linked to the above mentioned recognition; and that of defining the role of the ministry of oversight (*episcopos*) – relevant in this context in the same way. Thus, it has raised the question to what extent Baptists as a Church could more easily participate to the larger Church chorus, and whether Eucharist could be redefined as an ordinance

¹¹ WCC, *Common Vision*, p. 30, par. 65.

¹² Citations in this paragraph are from Van der Leer's unpublished paper available through the author.

with sacramental overtones, instead of being looked at as a simple ordinance or symbol (a sort of Baptist *via media* which might be extended, as well, to the issue of Baptist and its forms). Such an approach has been taken into account in the WCC paper, as in the passage below:

Baptism is thus a basic bond of unity. Some churches see the gift of the Holy Spirit as given in a special way through chrismation or confirmation, which is considered by them as one of the sacraments of initiation. The general agreement about baptism has led some who are involved in the ecumenical movement to call for the mutual recognition of baptism.¹³

The problem, however, as Van der Leer is putting it, is that while the Baptists look at the Tradition through the eyes of Scripture, the traditional Churches look at the Scripture through the eyes of Tradition. Here Van der Leer introduced a fourth topic in the debate, which complicated very much the whole discussion, since the relation between Scripture and Tradition is a very nuanced, a complex one, approached differently by various Churches: the all inclusive Tradition that includes the Scripture; the two linked bodies, Scripture and Tradition; Scripture as normative; and apostolic Tradition versus Tradition as later and non-apostolic tradition, etc.¹⁴

Thus, if this simplicity of sacraments could act as a means to dismantle the present mutual lack of recognition then it would become a desirable and highly effective theological tool in reuniting the Churches. However, it is not easy to argue the possibility of such a construct neither theologically, or on historical grounds. To his help, then, Van der Leer called Luther and his comments on the Third Order Service (The Latin Mass, the German Mass and the Third Mass, i.e. the house church service, or the house gathering, as fit service or worship for the living church).¹⁵ If house churches are to be the model accepted by all Churches, then this would be a minimalist approach that could bridge the differences between denominations and Churches. While such a solution might work at the level of Protestant and neo-protestant churches, it would definitely encounter more difficulties with the Traditional Churches. The conference participants, however, emphasised with plenty of arguments that Baptism and Eucharist are somewhat irreducible to minimalist definitions (for they are forms indicating towards the Incarnation of the eternal Son,¹⁶ and the debates about Christ's presence in the Eucharist, for example, have a long and complicated history, with stalemate positions on all sides). Therefore,

¹³ WCC *Common Vision*, p. 19, par. 41.

¹⁴ Observations made to greater extent by Bunaciu.

¹⁵ Martin Luther's Preface to *The German Mass and Order of Divine Service*, January 1526, in B.J. Kidd (ed), *Documents Illustrative of the Continental Reformation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911, 193-202, pp. 194-195; cf. <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/luthserv.html>, last accessed on 09 February 2015.

¹⁶ Peck, Smith, T. Pilli and Parush Parushev.

the WCC document with its views on sacraments and on church oversight ministry (*episcopos*) remains less than acceptable for all Baptists believers. The dialogue can continue trying to decide whether ordinances or symbols with a higher sacramental definition could provide a better Baptist theological language.

To be sure, the NT does not present a minimalist Church, yet an appreciably diversified Church existing in harmony. For example, an apostolic, Jewish Palestinian Church in Jerusalem (Peter, James, etc.), a Diaspora, Hellenistic Church also in Jerusalem (Stephen), growing internationalist Churches such as that in Caesarea (Cornelius' house) or Antioch (Barnabas, Lucius, Manaen, Niger, Saul) or the Churches in Galatia, Ephesus, Colossae, a mixed Greek and Jewish Church in Philippi, Corinth, Athens, Rome. Some were alright using the synagogues as places of worship, other used to meet in a particular house, others in schools, and those in Jerusalem – even went to the Temple. As stated in the famous couple of verses in Acts 2:46-47, the first believers in Jerusalem were quite eclectic in their worship and social witness: they met in the Temple (in fellowship with the rest of the Jews), they had fellowship and Eucharist in their own homes, in groups (in a pure Christian context), they had certain active social politics (gathering good, selling things and donating to the poor, or amongst themselves), and praised God publically. As a result, their integration in society was regarded with sympathy by people outside the Church and their numbers increased (however, at this point the Church in Jerusalem and its ideals looked pretty nationalistic in form and ideology). What could bring Christian Churches today to a new type of agreement or unity might be, as in the case of the Jerusalem Church, the need for ministry and mission and the pressure of problems and persecution.

Church diversity and unity between European affirmation and information

Having in view the good overall quality of the these papers, it appears that the CEBTS Conference in Warsaw, July 2014 has well attained one of its main goals that of encouraging proper information and serious reflection on the WCC document on *The Church – Towards a Common Vision*.

In this context one should notice certain obvious qualities of the WCC document such as the existence of a good structure, and in particular, the presence of good partial summaries in italics, which highlight special conclusions or specific difficulties still present in the Church dialogue on issues still open to debate. In this way the document allows for an easy

survey of its content and it is transparent in relation to the existence of further difficult issues, although it does not provide any solutions, only hints for further dialogue or sometimes raises rhetorical questions. There are also many references to various ecumenical sources and documents which support or illustrate the views presented in the main body text.

On a general note, the CEBTS papers have successfully highlighted some of the positive contributions to the common vision on the Church promoted by the WCC, supporting a constructive approach to ecumenism both inter-confessional and international, and encouraging further creative theological reflection. However, there are still some issues in need for further discussion, from a Biblical Studies perspective and from a theological and contemporary church-political perspective.

From the first point of view, the NT Church paradigms emphasize the need for unity in diversity. As discussed earlier the Book of Acts allows one to notice the existence of several different types of church, i.e. the Jewish church in Jerusalem (with native branches and diaspora, Hellenistic branches), the rather Hellenistic church in Antioch, the Gentile churches in Philippi, Corinth, Thessalonica and Athens, and mixed Gentile – Jewish churches in Ephesus and Rome, in the area Galatia, as well, in Samaria, in Ethiopia, in Crete, etc.

As seen in Acts and in Paul's epistles, these churches were confronted with various problems, including a certain misunderstanding of issues of morality and of sacraments and liturgy (the Eucharist, in 1 Corinthians 11), of general theology of history and mission (Romans 8-11, Galatians 3-4). The initial diversity of Christian Churches, in view of liturgy and gathering (houses, schools, synagogues, even the Temple) provides an important historical example and encouragement for diversity and Church unity today.

From the second point of view, the WCC document is aware of the extant difficulties in reaching commendable goals such as the 'full communion within a visibly united church – the goal of the ecumenical movement,' a communion in 'the fullness of apostolic faith', in sacramental life, in a 'truly one and mutually recognised ministry', in decision-making.¹⁷ It agrees, for example, that there is a legitimate diversity, as well, as a less defendable one:

Cultural and historical factors contribute to the rich diversity within the Church. The Gospel needs to be proclaimed in languages, symbols and images that are relevant to particular times and contexts so as to be lived authentically in each time and place. Legitimate diversity is compromised

¹⁷ WCC, *Common Vision*, p. 17, par. 37.

whenever Christians consider their own cultural expressions of the gospel as the only authentic ones, to be imposed upon Christians of other cultures.¹⁸

The issue is regarded with maximum interest since it raises the question whether the mutual acknowledging of sacraments and other rites is indeed possible:

Further, are there ways in which fuller mutual understanding can be established between the churches which celebrate these rites and those Christian communities convinced that the sharing of life in Christ does not require the celebration of sacraments or other rites?¹⁹

At the same time, although not cited in the WCC papers, there are other voices as well on the unity and diversity of the Church making themselves audible mainly among the Eastern Orthodox Churches or even among the Baptists in the Eastern European countries. For example, Maxim, the patriarch of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, has asked for the discontinuation of its membership at the WCC in 9th April 1998. In 1948, at the first and founding meeting of the WCC in Amsterdam, August 22 – September 4, only the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Church of Cyprus, and the Church of Greece were present.²⁰ In the Eastern Orthodox Churches the WCC meetings are seen sometimes as humanistic, syncretistic, man-made associations, even as heretical.²¹ International quests for Church unity have been regarded as a sign of the last times,²² and have been met with obvious uneasiness.²³

¹⁸ WCC, *Common Vision*, p. 13, par. 28.

¹⁹ WCC, *Common Vision*, pp. 19-20.

²⁰ V.T. Stavrides, *History of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 113, see also pp. 111-112. Cf. Gerasimos J. Konidaris, "Amsterdam," entry in the *Threskevtike kai Ethike Enkyklopaideia*, Vol. 2, cols. 395-396, Athens, 1963. The relation between the Ecumenical Movement, as expressed through the World Council of Churches, and the Undivided Church has been the subject matter of many careful clarifications. The General Secretary of the WCC, Visser 't Hooft stated that the Council, as such, is "a Council of Churches, not the Council of the one undivided Church", yet "we would move forward towards the manifestation of the One Holy Church", since "We are above all a fellowship which seeks to express that unity in Christ already given to us and to prepare the way for a much fuller and much deeper expression of that unity" (R.W. Howard, "The Report of the First Assembly", *Churchman* 1949, 063/3, 164-169, p. 167; cf. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, ed, *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches : The Official Report*, London: S.C.M. Press, 1949, pp. 12-16). Such a goal prompted the reaction of many Eastern Orthodox Churches).

²¹ This is the position of Archimandrite Justin (Popovic) against ecumenism in his *Memorandum* presented to the Serbian Synod (November 13/26, 1974), see e.g. http://orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/ecum_marches.aspx, endnote 6. Cf. *Koinonia*, March-April 1975, pp. 95-101; also in *Orthodoxos Typos*, No. 235/June 1, 1975, and *Orthodoxos Enstasis kai Martyria*, Nos. 18-21, January-December 1990, pp. 166-173. D. Staniloae, well known Romanian Orthodox theologian, wrote rather negatively about the ecumenical movement and maintained that there is only one Church, not two, so Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy cannot be described as „sister churches” *Omagiu memoriei părintelui Dumitru Staniloae*, Edit. Mitropoliei Moldovei și Bucovinei, Iași, 1994, p. 93. Cf. also "Schimbarea la Față", nr. 2, luna 11/1997, p. 8.

²² The idea that a world church international is in fact not for the benefit of the Christians but a sign of the end times, of the Antichrist, is a much spread conviction that could be met both in Orthodox circles and in evangelical ones. See, Arhm. Averchie, father Serafim Rose, *Apocalipsa în învățatura Sfinților Părinți*

There is considerable apprehension in practical matters in Eastern Europe from both evangelicals and the Eastern Orthodox churches. There are many contrasts between official statements and real life policies.²⁴ In some countries the Orthodox so called State Church tries to overrule or act as an equal to the Government's specialised departments.²⁵ While this is so, in other areas there is more cooperation, admittedly, even a very friendly one: in reciprocal academic audits, doctoral schools, certain social and academic events, charity etc.

Perhaps this kind of perception of Church and Churches in a particular area in terms of ministry, witness and cooperation would make the debates on WCC document in conferences such as that of CEBTS, even more necessary and useful. The CEBTS conference in Warsaw, 2-5 July 2015 has provided a very friendly and welcoming environment for engaging in this debate in a general atmosphere of true worship and genuine witness for Christ's work among the people of Europe through the Baptist Churches and communities.

It would be interesting as a further suggestion to encourage future papers on some less explored themes from the WCC document such as religious pluralism and persecution, ethics and the Church life and mission, or the understanding the Holy Spirit ministry for the unity the Body of Christ.

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(Bucureşti: Edit. Teos, 2000), p. 9. Cf. also Serafim Rose, *Ortodoxia şi religia viitorului*, Chişinău (Chişinău: Edit. Cartea Moldovei, 1995), pp. 21-35 (Cf. S. Rose, *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future* (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1979)).

²³ John H. Erickson, 'Concerning the Balamand Statement,' *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 42 (1997), pp. 25-43; idem, 'The Formation of Orthodox Ecclesial Identity,' *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 42 (1998), pp. 301-314. John Borelli and John H. Erickson, eds., *The Quest for Unity: Orthodox and Catholics in Dialogue: Documents of the Joint International Commission and Official Dialogues in the United States, 1965-1995* (Crestwood NY and Washington DC: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press and United States Catholic Conference, 1996). See also 'Uneasiness About Modernism and Ecumenism in the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate', translated from the Russian translation published in *Pravoslavnaya Rusia*, No. 22, 1995. This appeared in *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, pp. 50-56.

²⁴ Evangelicals are being often discriminated against and not accepted to be buried in the local communal cemeteries, religion teachers in the first and second grade schools need to be approved by the Orthodox Church, orthodox priests try to keep a detailed evidence on evangelical membership and manifestations in villages and towns, in schools and other academic institutions, in the media.

²⁵ The presidential elections in Romania, Nov. 2014, ended with the unexpected win of Klaus Johannis, a liberal Lutheran from Sibiu, Transylvania, and have been run through many tough and sometimes embarrassing debates on the issue of religion and ethnicity, Eastern Orthodoxy and patriotism, etc.

Praising God

Bible Study, Isaiah 12:1-6

Michael Rohde

Dear sisters and brothers from European Baptists Seminaries!¹

During this conference we are speaking about unity in Christ and are discussing newest key works of the ecumenical movement. Despite all differences of denominations or opinions between us, my strongest personal impression of unity is awakened, when we are worshipping together. When we sing to the Lord we find a sense of unity in Christ, which we may not be able to reach by arguing about our doctrines.

If you want to praise somebody, you do not remain silent. If you are pleased about somebody, you find words of praise. If your heart is full of worship, you find sounds and tunes to the words, and you find a song on your lips. Songs touch the heart, so the heart starts to swing. Songs can move our heart and set us in motion. Music flows into us and moves the body, first the toe, then the whole body. To sing involves power, a power that has a strong impact on our thoughts and emotions.

We are surrounded by a lot of “feel-happy-music”. You can listen to “feel-happy-music” if you listen to the radio while you are driving or you can listen to your mp3 player anywhere and even if you are shopping, the music of the supermarket wants you to feel happy. All want to lift up your mood and emotion.

The Bible offers us more than “feel-happy-music”. The praise songs of the bible do not lighten the darkness for a moment only; these songs offer strong support even in hard days. Because: To praise is to extol God. Therefore let us listen to one of the praise songs of the Holy Scripture, from Isaiah 12, 1-6 (New International Version 1987)

¹In that day you will say:

‘I will praise you, O LORD.

Although you were angry with me,
your anger has turned away
and you have comforted me.

²Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust and not be afraid.

¹ This Bible study was given at the European Baptist Theological Teachers’ Conference together with the Division of Theology and Education of European Baptist Federation hold at Radość near Warsaw, 2-5 July 2014.

The LORD, the LORD himself, is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation.'

³ With joy you will draw water
from the wells of salvation.

⁴ In that day you will say:
'Give praise to the LORD, proclaim his name;
make known among the nations what he has done,
and proclaim that his name is exalted.'

⁵ Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious things;
let this be known to all the world.

⁶ Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion,
for great is the Holy One of Israel among you.'

1. To praise God is to draw from a well

In the centre of our song is a beautiful parable of God: God is like a bubbling well, spring or fountain. God is a bubbling well!

If a natural well is discovered you can draw from the well beyond all measure. At Jericho – one of the oldest cities of the world – there is a well, the *ajin Jericho* – and there are 127.000 litres of sparkling water every day! And Jericho is a fruitful and green oasis in the desert.

The Israelites knew what it means to live as Bedouins or nomads and that you need water to survive in the desert. They knew long trips of wandering in the desert. They knew what it means to suffer from thirst. Good experiences with the living God for them were like drawing fresh water from a spring.

When we were on holiday at Denmark, we saw a sign on the map to a holy spring or well. And it was fascinating to see the water, just bubbling out of the ground. It was so fascinating that my 6 year old daughter walked so close to the spring that she fell into the holy spring. And each time my daughter has too much energy, we say: You fell into the holy well when you were young!

Surely, it is like this: God wants us to draw from him like drawing from a well! 'Surely God is my salvation! I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the LORD, is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation!' (Vs. 2)

To praise God – does it mean being happy, always and every time and putting into our music player the „Happy“-Song – so that it predominates over all other sounds and noises of life? Is worship a way to

stimulate ourselves and to push ourselves, not to see and recognize the difficulties of daily life? Far from it!

2. To praise God digs out of the depths!

To praise God draws from the depths!

If Isaiah 12 calls Israel to praise God, than this call is not a superficial or cheap propaganda. To sing songs of the Bible means to unfold and develop trust – against all appearances.

To sing means to have hope!
 To have hope means to believe that there is a way beyond the horizon.
 To praise God means to say “Yes” to life, even if life is hard.

For the old Israelites this meant:
 Even if the country was occupied,
 even if the holy temple was destroyed,
 even their king was sitting in prison,
 even all there securities of faith were broken
 they would still trust in God!

When Israel was well off, the singing of joyful songs and offering at the temple was not a problem. When there was political security and wealth and prosperity – it was easy to praise God. But – without success? Full of disappointments? Without security and full of doubts? In such times for Israel God became nebulous. They could not recognize and see God’s love at first sight! What they did see was the destructed city wall of Jerusalem and the destroyed temple. For them this experience was not a defeat of their God, but was the result of the weakness of their faith. The mysterious acting of God they called: Gods anger. *I will praise you! You were angry with me!*

If a human is angry, we reckon him to be out of control, to be angry and full of emotions and an arbitrary temper. But the way the Bible speaks about God’s anger is different: God’s anger is just, clear and full of love. His anger is his glowing love. Israel believes that the loss of their temple, country and king is God’s anger but at the same time, they believe that God’s anger will come to an end and that God will comfort them! Therefore – in the darkest hour of their history, Israel sings a song of praise and thanks.

The name of the prophet – Jeschajahu - Isaiha – means: God has saved! And Isaiah sings: ‘Surely God is my salvation! I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the LORD, is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation!’ (Vs. 2) The strength to keep on going – for Isaiah God himself is this strength!

God is his spring of power. Songs of praise can become a well of strength for them who sing. Isaiah can say: God you are my strength and you are my song! The translators discuss if the confession is: God is my strength or God is my song! But for Isaiah it is both: To sing for God can become strength for the one, who sings! To praise God means digging out of the depths!

And so many people can testify to having this deep experience, who have overcome fear, and suffering and darkness of life. Praise songs help us to keep on going even through difficulties. To be honest: Sometimes we cannot believe what we are singing. Sometimes the words are too grand and the song is running in front of us. But when we put ourselves into the song and into the love of God, we can meet the presence of the Lord. While we are singing, we can meet his encouragement for our lives.

This is the main difference between spiritual songs and the other song. To sing “Happy”-song makes us happy for a while, but to sing spiritual songs open the opportunity to meet God himself! Through the singing and the songs we do not express our own desires and needs and our own fears and hopes only. While we are singing, there is a flow of encouragement and confidence from God to us! We are meeting the living God!

With the songs of the bible and the new songs of believers we can put our small faith into them. And the small faith?! It can grow. And we can put ourselves with a heart of fear into them. And the fearful heart?! It can receive confidence. Through singing for God our faith can grow bigger than we are – towards God. And then we can sing with a full heart and full confidence and confess that God is our saviour.

3. To praise God proclaims Gods plan to save!

The Israelites sing: God is my salvation! The Lord has become my salvation! With Him you will draw water from the wells of salvation! (or: With you we will draw water)

The name of God in the New Testament is Jeschuah/Jesus, which means: God saves. God sent his only son for all humans who do not belong

to Israel, to save them, so that Jesus becomes this well of salvation! Jesus becomes the water of life! Jesus becomes the song!

The people of Israel confess that God is their saviour – the saviour out of the slavery of Egypt – the saviour out of the captivity of Babylon – and even today's Jews confess God as a merciful God – despite the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

As Christians we confess that Jesus Christ is the saviour and that Jesus can become the water of life for all woman and men! Isaiah calls upon all believers to make known among the nations what he has done! Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things, let this be known to all the world!

And if Jews had not continued to tell and sing about what God has done, we would not have the Old Testament and we would not hear, how our great God can lead us through the desert and how wonderfully he can be water in a time of thirst.

And if Christians did not continue to tell and sing, the New Testament would be far smaller. There is this long chain of singers.

There are old and new hymns and songs:

Singing from the desert;

Singing from the waters of Babylon;

Singing of prisoners of Rome like Paul and Silas;

Singing of Birkenau and Auschwitz;

And singing during our conference and all our services in all countries of the world.

It is up to us

To sing a praise song about God in our daily life,

Each one of us – even each different kind of denomination of the churches,

To sing its one tune and melody,

But to sing daily.

When we speak about mission, most people think about arguing and how to convince other people about our faith. But our mission is to sing songs of joy and praise about God – to confess that HE is sometimes mysterious, but that God helps on difficult tracks; that God gives strength and that we can draw from him like you draw water from a well.

To Praise God is like drawing from a well!

To Praise God digs from the depths!

To Praise God makes know his will to save!

Linked to the topic of our conference the document *The Church – Towards a Common Vision* says: ‘In the liturgy, the people of God experience communion with God and fellowship with Christians of all times and places. They gather with their presider, proclaim the Good News, confess their faith, pray, teach, learn, **offer praise and thanksgiving**, receive the Body and Blood of the Lord, and are sent out in mission. (art. 67. ‘Conclusion’).’

Amen

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Book Review

Pavel Hošek, *Kouzlo vyprávění. Proměňující moc příběhu a „křest fantazie“ v pojetí C. S. Lewise* [The Magic of Storytelling: Transforming power of narrative and the „baptism of imagination“ in the writings of C. S. Lewis, in Czech]. Praha: Návrat domů, 2013, 128 pages paperback ISBN 978-80-7255-293-1; and Pavel Hošek, *Cesta do středu skutečnosti. Směřování k nebeskému cíli duchovní pouti v myšlení a díle C. S. Lewise* [Journey into the Centre of Reality: The heavenly goal of spiritual pilgrimage in the thought and work of C. S. Lewis, in Czech]. Brno: CDK, 2014, 152 pages paperback, ISBN 978-80-7325-347-9

In the post-Soviet countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the popularity of C. S. Lewis, whose numerous books have only been introduced to local readers some 25 years ago, continues to grow. His imaginative writings it seems resonate exceptionally well with literary tastes and intellectual needs of Central-Eastern Europeans, both religious and secular. That fact has been one of the motivating factors for the Czech scholar Pavel Hošek, an author of three books and numerous articles on C. S. Lewis and his literary legacy. His first monograph on Lewis, *C. S. Lewis, mýtus, imaginace a pravda* [C. S. Lewis: Myth, Imagination and Truth] (Praha: Návrat domů, 2003) was published more than a decade ago. It was followed recently by two inter-related books, which are reviewed below. The first is on Lewis' understanding of imagination, narrative literature and the transforming effects of literary experience and the second – on the broader theological and philosophical presuppositions of Lewis' literary work. The aim of the review is to present the results of Hošek's perceptive analysis to the English language readers in a hope that his important findings will make their way to the wider readership.

The first monograph, entitled *The Magic of Storytelling* analyses Lewis' theory of literary art and its effects on attentive readers against the background of broader academic discourse on transforming potential of story-telling as it flourished in several different fields especially in the second half of twentieth century. One may call to mind here the narrative theologising of James Wm. McClendon and his school of thought.

The first part of the book prepares grounds for a detailed analysis of Lewis' understanding of imagination and narrative by summarising the most important results of recent academic debate on storytelling and its effects in philosophical hermeneutics after Paul Ricoeur, in Jungian psychology and narrative psychotherapy, in narrative theology (Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, Stanley Hauerwas etc.). An innovative line of Hošek's

thought is the scholarly discussion about Eastern European Chassidic movement and its narrative literature (Nachman of Bracław, Martin Buber, Elie Wiesel, Rami Shapiro and others).

Against the backdrop of this broader context, the second part of the book focuses on Lewis' particular understanding of imaginative experience as it has been influenced by German and English Romanticism and especially by Samuel T. Coleridge and George MacDonald. Hošek reflects on Lewis' view of literary art as "myth-making," influenced in significant measure by his life-long friend John R. R. Tolkien. He mulls over Lewis' understanding of the relation between myth and Gospel, his particular and very complex "theology of literary art" and also, naturally, over all the implications Lewis has drawn from his theory of imagination, narrative art and transforming potential of stories in his own artistic literary work, i.e. in his works such as *The Narnia Chronicles*, *The Cosmic Trilogy*, *Till We Have Faces* etc.

In the concluding part of the book the author summarises and evaluates Lewis' elaborate theory of narrative and its transforming effects under the heading "baptism of imagination", a phrase borrowed from Lewis himself. Hošek points out that Lewis has used it repeatedly to describe his own profound literary experience with the stories written by George MacDonald, an experience which had a life-long impact on Lewis' imagination and was an important factor in his journey to Christian conversion.

The second monograph, entitled *Journey into the Centre of Reality*, which was published in 2014, builds on and develops further some of the key themes of the earlier book. It focuses primarily on Lewis' philosophical understanding of reality and his theological views concerning human ultimate destiny. Lewis gradually developed his philosophical and theological views. They have been more or less explicitly expressed in his popular fiction, but they have also been partially articulated in his scholarly works on literary history and in his books on Christian apologetics. Hošek argues that a key element of Lewis' mature conceptual space is a hierarchical view of reality, similar in many respects to the medieval cosmological model, as it combines Christian Trinitarian-monotheistic perspective with neo-platonic thought and Aristotelian-Ptolemaic cosmology.

The first part of the monograph shortly summarises Lewis' composite view of reality and discusses its most important components and theological implications. The next two parts are centred on several key influences, which shaped and developed Lewis' thought. Among them Hošek delineates neo-platonic philosophy, Rudolf Otto's understanding of

religious experience as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, George MacDonald's fantasy works and his romantic theory of imagination, J. R. R. Tolkien's theological understanding of literary art, Owen Barfield's complex idealist philosophy and Charles Williams' understanding of poetic language and its referentiality.

In the next part of the book the author discusses the consequences of Lewis' particular understanding of reality and human eschatological destiny. He reviews Lewis' thought in relation to the "objective" nature and value of Truth, Goodness and Beauty; in relation to theodicy and supranaturalist model of reality; in relation to Lewis' appreciation of medieval cosmology; and in relation to his critique of several aspects of contemporary post-Enlightenment Western culture. The last part of the monograph deals with Lewis' comprehensive eschatological vision of redeemed universe, including his understanding of heaven and hell, good and evil, salvation, damnation and of the final eschatological destiny of humankind and of all created reality.

The two books can be viewed as the author's successful attempt to introduce the internationally flourishing thorough systematic reflection of Lewis' thought in Central European cultural and academic context. With these works and others, Hošek is on a mission to fill in a gap in Central-Eastern European academic discourse on influential religious thinkers of the twentieth century. This is why a particular value of both monographs is that the author introduces not just Lewis' numerous writings, but also the vast and rapidly growing body of secondary literature focusing on different aspects of Lewis' work. Most of the secondary writings on Lewis are only available in English. In his earliest monograph and in the two recently published books, Hošek tries to provide serious (Czech and Slovak) students of Lewis with solid background reading and to contextualise Lewis scholarship in the particularities and complexities of the Central European context.

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